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Interview with Paul Pitt (2)

Paul Pitt

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Abstract of the content of the interview: Geography of Arkansas, Harding University, Politics

Person Interviewed: Pitt Paul Martin
Full Name Last First Middle
Known by any other names? (list) Coyote Clay
Date of Birth 10-11-45

Geographic Places as Subjects within the interview:

State	County	City/Community	Time Period/Years
<u>Arkansas</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Searcy</u>	<u>1963-present</u>
<u>Tennessee</u>	<u>Shelby</u>	<u>Memphis</u>	<u>pre 1963</u>

Person as Subjects within the Interview:

Title	Last Name	First	Middle	DOB
<u>President</u>	<u>Kennedy</u>	<u>John</u>	<u>Fitzgerald</u>	<u>5-29-17</u>
<u>President</u>	<u>Clinton</u>	<u>William</u>	<u>Jefferson</u>	<u>8-19-46</u>

Events as Subjects within the Interview:

Vietnam War, Kennedy Assassination, Civil Rights Movement 1960s
Specific Date(s)

Other Major Places as Subjects within the Interview:

N/A
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Other Notes: N/A

Arkansas History Interview with Paul Pitt

Ashley Shelton

25 March 2012

Paul Pitt was born October 11, 1945, in California. Shortly after his birth, he and his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where Pitt spent the remainder of his adolescent life. He attended the Harding Academy of Memphis, and graduated in 1963. Pitt began attending Harding University in the fall of 1963 and graduated in the spring of 1967. He and his wife of 45 years, Sharon, have lived in Memphis and Tulsa, and currently reside in Searcy where they have lived for 41 years.

This interview contains discussion of the geography and wildlife of Arkansas. Pitt designed and constructed an underground house; therefore, much of the interview relates to the building process and the challenges regarding the geography. Additionally, Pitt is an outdoor enthusiast, so there is discussion of his knowledge of the outdoors. This interview also contains discussion of Harding University. Since Pitt attending Harding and has been teaching here for 41 years, he was able to discuss key events and changes on campus. Last, this interview contains discussion of politics within Arkansas, as well as national politics and the reaction of Arkansas.

Ashley Shelton: Tell me your name and occupation.

Paul Pitt: My name is Coyote Clay, my other name is Paul Pitt. My occupation, I teach at Harding in the art department.

Ashley Shelton: How long have you lived in Arkansas?

Paul Pitt: In Arkansas, well I started living here in the Fall of '63 because I came here as a student at Harding, so ever since 1963, except for a few years when I was teaching in Memphis and I was a student at University of Tulsa, and also was a student again at University of Memphis....so, every since then.

Ashley Shelton: You're from Memphis, what was your perception of Arkansas before you came to Harding?

Paul Pitt: Well, I had a girlfriend that lived in Dice, AR, and I thought it was a farmland type place because she lived on a farm, her daddy was a farmer. And I would visit her on Sundays, and sometimes, very few times, I would go to their farm for Sunday lunch. But I guess I thought Arkansas was kinda woodsy or primitive, kinda like the farm my grandparents had in Tennessee – rural, which I like very much.

Ashley Shelton: What did they grow on their farm?

Paul Pitt: My grandparents? Well, it was a small farm, let's see, they grew cotton, I remember picking cotton with them. They did have a huge vegetable garden. I'm not sure of all the other things my granddad raised, but the cotton crop, and then silage, I believe he grew silage also. But he had cows and horses and chickens and I got to help gather eggs and feed the chickens and I remember milking cows and shucking corn, so I guess he grew corn, too because he had a corn crib. And I remember riding in his little wagon to town behind the tractor with cotton to the mill. And doing things a little kid would do.

I liked to be thought of as someone who lived in the country and I liked it when I got scratches on my hands because it looked like I was a farm boy, not a city slicker. I didn't want to be a city slicker.

Ashley Shelton: Describe your experience in Arkansas at the beginning, when you moved here to go to Harding. What was the climate? What were the people like?

Paul Pitt: The climate – it seemed like it rained a lot. But the people that were on campus, because I was there on campus most of the time. But they were all older than me it seemed like, I guess. I was 17 when I started college. And it seemed like an impossible task to graduate, although I took it one semester at a time. My first semester was the toughest one. I only had 14 hours first semester, but it was the hardest semester of all. I later took as many as 20 hours and it wasn't as hard as the first semester. And I suppose I was very immature and naïve and I really looked up to and respected my teachers. I really thought of them as really something high and I just really thought of them as very knowledgeable people. And I just think that's not the case these days with some of the students.

Ashley Shelton: You raised your children here, right?

Paul Pitt: Most of the time, part of the time I was back in school again in Memphis – 2 years – I went back to get my last degree, so they were small kids even then.

Ashley Shelton: Now, you sorta live in a unique home that you built yourself. Describe that experience – the geography of Arkansas – did it help or hurt?

Paul Pitt: Well, it really goes back to the fact that I love caves so much, and I was even talking about an underground house back in the 60s before I ever became a student here. No, that's wrong. I had already been a student and I was teaching in Memphis when I

was talking about it. That's right. Around 67, 8, 9, when I was talking about an underground house. But, when I became a faculty member here in '71, I began pretty soon to go on caving trips with the caving club here on campus. I really liked the caves, I mean, I just really enjoyed them. Unfortunately, the caves really don't start of any size until you get about 30 miles north of Searcy. The limestone really begins there, along there, so you have the caves that occur in limestone and gypsum and of course everybody knows it occurs by the way the water flows through the rock at eats away the limestone to a cavity and then starts to fill it up with formations because of the calcite in the water. But, I've been on caving trips and it was just really fun. I've been in a cave nice and warm and come outside and it would be snowing. I've been in a cave nice and cool and come outside and it would be burning hot – between 99 and 100 degrees. It was really obvious that a cave-type situation was very nice as far as temperature goes. So, that was one of the big points for wanting to make a cave house. So, my house does not have extremes of temperature the way an above ground house experiences because the earth moderates it and the earth actually gives me free heat in the wintertime and free cooling in the summertime. And, it is very safe during storms, too.

Ashley Shelton: Did the geography make it an easy task to build the house, or were there things that made it difficult, or both?

Paul Pitt: Well, it was a big more expensive to build underground, but I was fortunate enough to find a piece of ground here in Searcy that had rock just to the edge to wear I was gonna build it. It was a slate bed that when we dug out it was slate and the guy who dug it out said he couldn't have built a better pad for us to build a house on. So, it was though as if it was there and right to the back edge of it sandstone began and was as

though the Lord had been planning that because we dug out and there was this place, this slate bed that had this limestone at the back of it, so we just built there. We had to use machines. I did some digging with pick and shovel, but we used mostly machines that we hired to dig it out, and of course a machine to cover it up. Although, on the top of it, I wouldn't let the big machine get on top of the house, and so we wheel barrowed load after load of dirt up on top. And, also, scrounged around on the 9.5 acres – actually it was 5 acres when I built it – trying to find things that were living and could grow on top. So, that's why I got thorns and blackberries and things on top for many years until just a couple of years ago I cut down all the trees and put on a new water-proofing on top – rubber-palmed liner on top – and hauled and hauled more dirt, and my wife helped me with this. We hauled 5-gallon buckets with dirt in them up and covered the house with dirt. And now no trees are growing through. I used to have to trim the trees periodically, but now I don't have to trim the trees. The waterproofing is so thick the trees don't grow through it.

Ashley Shelton: How many acres are you on?

Paul Pitt: We have 9.5. We started with 5 and then we bought an additional 4.5, so we have 9.5 acres. It sits right in the northwest corner of the city limits of Searcy. It's in the woods. When you're there you think you're out in the boonies, but you're really not because it only takes a few moments to get into town.

Ashley Shelton: Do you live near water?

Paul Pitt: There is a lake nearby now in the valley below us. And also, there's always been a creek flowing through the valley below us where our property comes to the edge, right in the center of the valley. And then the beavers have dammed up the creek on one

side, so we have a beaver pond on our property. And then we have this big lake that we have full access to just west of us.

Ashley Shelton: What sorts of creatures do you see?

Paul Pitt: We have seen – when we were building and digging and so on there was a huge poisonous snake. I think it was a copperhead that was probably this big around. And Sharon has also seen something more like this big around more recently. And there have been several snakes – rattlesnake I remember, and just several snakes. But usually we don't see snakes at all. We've also had groundhog, deer, possum, raccoon, armadillo. I actually heard panther several times. It woke me up in the middle of the night. I thought it was a woman screaming. And then when it screamed again I recognized what it was when I was awake. It actually screamed several occasions. One night my youngest son had some friends over and those boys were afraid to go to their cars because the panther was screaming, so they waited a while, and they were able to get out to the car and get home safely. Never saw the panther, just heard it scream several times.

Ashley Shelton: Do any of these animals disturb the work you've done on your house?

Paul Pitt: We think maybe a dog dug down and exposed the early waterproofing because it was not as good as what we have now and that sun got to it and caused it to leak so I had to do a major repair job on that. We also have a few mole problems. That's about the extent. We don't have much more problems with animals. It's really nice. We have squirrels we see jump from tree to tree. There are all kinds of birds. There are geese that fly over the lake that's right below us and to the right of us. There's just quite a few animals there. There's of course frogs and crickets and such in the summertime that sing

all night. It's just really nice to be in the woods because that's what I want to do. I want to live in the woods and I was able to have that dream come true.

Ashley Shelton: That leads to my next question. You like to be outside and you describe yourself as wanting to be a primitive type of guy. What is it about Arkansas that allows you to do that?

Paul Pitt: It's not totally a sidewalk jungle, asphalt and concrete everywhere. There's plenty of that, but there are places like Searcy with, around the edges of it, such as the one I found, this piece of woods. And, so I really do admire people who have enough ingenuity to not have to go to Wal-Mart for everything, or the grocery store. But, instead, are able to use what they find in nature and make what they need from that. That's why, that's one reason why I really, really like to view and see programs about people who live in Africa, or people who live in South America, people who live in Peru, or people who live in an indigenous kind of fashion, so that they just make what they need from what they find straight from nature. And I really respect people who live in places like that because they have a terrific education of what plant is good for this and what plant is good for that, how to find this kind of food, how to find water, how to deal with everyday kind of challenges and so that's a different kind of education. A lot of times we think of ourselves as sophisticated society and modern times, and yet if we were to exchange places with someone who lives in the jungle I wonder who could survive. Probably the person from the jungle would be able to survive much easier than we would be able to survive because our knowledge is not the same as his. He would have a tough time moving here, but I think it would be astounding for him to walk in a supermarket that sells food and wonder how it got there.

Ashley Shelton: If you had the opportunity or did live primitively off the land in Arkansas, what sorts of things would you use to help you survive that's unique to this geography?

Paul Pitt: Unique to this geography? Well, I don't know. I know that there are a lot of things – the geography we have is pretty common in the south and across a lot of parts of the United States, in the eastern portion and close to the Mississippi River delta. There are certain kinds of foods that grow really well here, and I just think that I, if I had to survive and didn't have the opportunity to go to the grocery store I would be more of a gardener than I am. We do grow a garden every year, an organic garden, but I would have to try to plant more things. Also, be aware, become more knowledgeable than I am, although I have studied some, but more knowledgeable than I am about the plants that grow wild here, even greenbrier, that thing that sticks you when you walk through the woods, is part of it is edible and it is a source of food, so I don't really think of weeds as being weeds because a lot of times some people think oh, that's just a weed, but it isn't. Dandelions are considered weeds, but their edible. And, there's just a lot of things. Every plant God has made and put there, there are purposes for plants. Some of our plants help take care of wounds. Some plants help take care of food needs. Some plants provide things to make things with, and you can make, for instance, cordage from the bark of a willow tree. And you can – what tree is it where aspirin comes from? It may be willow also. But there's just a tremendous...in fact, if you think about it, everything we have that we're not accustomed to going straight to nature for actually comes from nature through the hands of people who refine that and produce it in such a way that we can recognize it and use it. And we have it available in stores; it's available to go buy. But, if we would

know how to produce from each of those natural things we could make whatever we find in the store.

Ashley Shelton: We're going to shift gears a little bit. Let's talk about politics a little bit. When you came in 1963, was this before or after Kennedy had been assassinated?

Paul Pitt: Kennedy was not assassinated as yet. It was the fall of '63. He was killed just a few months later. And, of course I did not approve of him as president because he was a Democrat. And, I really was not, I really did not know that much about politics at the time, but I thought of him as somebody coming from a rich family and I have to confess that I made some comment about I wonder what else his daddy's gonna buy because his daddy was rich and I was a naïve kid and I didn't really know that much. But, politics, I didn't really concern myself much with them, either, but I just knew that I wanted to have a Republican rather than...what then was a Republican, rather than a Democrat at the time. But, if you look back in history you'll see that the Democrats, back in the early 60s actually were more like the Republicans now. Things have gotten more liberal in the Republican Party and more liberal in the Democratic Party. So, I'm not really happy with the Republicans with the way they are now because they are so liberal in so many ways.

Ashley Shelton: Talk about, this was a time when civil rights was a big issue, what was it like on Harding's campus?

Paul Pitt: Actually, it was no problems to speak of. In the fall of '63, Harding introduced the first three black men, or black students, and they were all males. And, I remember very much Dr. Benson, who was then president, introducing them too everyone in chapel, I believe it was, and he had them stand, and had us to greet them and welcome them as students. And I didn't know of any problems on campus, any race

problems at that time. That's when I was a freshman and so I don't know of any to speak of. It's just a Christian place and I'd been taught during growing up that there was no difference as far as one race being better than the other and yet the culture around me was such that the blacks were not treated as well, and I still remember separate water fountains, for instance, and separate bathrooms and people riding in the back of the city bus. In fact, when I was in the second grade I remember doing an art project for my second grade class, and I was to do a drawing. I did a drawing that was put in an art show, I think. And I drew a city bus like they had in Memphis and I drew black people in the back and white people in the front. That's just the way it was and I was just recording history.

Ashley Shelton: Did you notice any unrest in Searcy?

Paul Pitt: I don't remember being on campus...you know, I didn't have a car. I had a bicycle, which later was stolen here in Searcy on campus. I had loaned it to my brother-in-law and he wasn't careful enough with it and it got stolen. No, no, I'm sorry. Yes, that's right. He had it borrowed and it got stolen while he had it and it was here. That was later after I was not a student. I think I had loaned it to him after I was already teaching in Memphis. But, no I didn't really have experience off-campus very much at all. If I had to go anywhere I had to walk. I did walk downtown to the square on a very few occasions. But, I didn't really have a connection with the community, only basically the campus when I was here. Not having a car, not getting out. So, the campus was like a little Camelot here in town. But I do know that there is still some prejudice, I believe, even now in Pangburn, which is pretty close to here, I have heard, and I know there was some Ku Klux Klan activity not long ago.

Ashley Shelton: The Vietnam War was going on during this time. Was there much conflict about that, or did you witness protests?

Paul Pitt: I did not witness any protests, although the year or the next year or so after I was teaching I heard that even on Harding's campus there was a protest of some sort, I didn't even know what it was about. It might have been about the war. But, knowing that the war was going on really was a good reason to study hard and stay in school because at that point in time if I was a college student they would not draft me. However, finally, after I graduated, and was teaching school in Memphis, things were still hot and heavy and they respected the fact that I was teaching I suppose for a while. Then, the lottery came up and the very first time there was the lottery my number, I believe it was 163, somewhere along in there, and so they called me in, I mean, they herded me in. I was only 24 years old, teaching school, and they herded me in there to get checked up, checked us out, checked us through like cattle, you know, very little respect for the individual on the whole – not like I was used to. And, so, I remember the guy saying, "Well, boys we all know our number's coming up, and when you get called in bring your toothbrush, bring this, bring that..." And it was kinda scary that it looked like it was going to happen, but they didn't get to my number and so once the lottery was done for that year they had a new lottery for the next year and so my number was such that I stayed in the teaching business. I was teaching Bible and art every day at Harding Academy in Memphis for three years. Then, I went to graduate school at the University of Tulsa for summer and two semesters and another summer. And then I was hired to teach here on Harding campus beginning fall of '71. Then I taught eight years here on the Harding campus and then I went back to school to get my last degree. I went back to the

University of Memphis to get that one. And then I've been back here ever since in '81 til, what is it, 2012.

Ashley Shelton: Did you pay more attention to politics when you were older? Can you describe the political climate?

Paul Pitt: Yeah, it becomes more important to me in Arkansas. Yeah, I'm very much aware of when Bill Clinton became governor. I was aware of that. Then, he was very much electable. Again, he was a Democrat and I didn't vote for him; I never did. I met him when he came to Harding to speak on one occasion. He was on the stage with Bill McInteer, Jim Bill McInteer, and I remember very much Jim Bill McInteer speaking up there and he was a fantastic speaker, very energetic, interjected jokes and various one-liners and things that just kept his messages very interesting. I remember Bill Clinton just laughing himself silly, if you will, waiting for his turn to talk, but he was very much having a good time, I think, on stage at Harding. I shook his hand; I won't say I met him. I just shook his hand after it was over at the back of the Benson auditorium. But, you know, politics, I think, you know, down through the years has become more and more important all the time and finally I was just cruising on the radio one day in my office and just going from station to station and there was this guy who just started talking and he sounded like what I was, yeah, that's what I, he's right, this guy, he's not sounding like all these other people on the radio. He's sounding, yeah, that's conservative, that's the right thing. So, that's when I met Rush Limbaugh because he was saying things that I believed. Now, I don't believe everything Rush says, I don't agree with everything he says, but I starting listening to him, I don't know, about 20 years ago, I guess. I don't remember when it was, but that was something I started listening to him and I was more

interested in politics to a greater degree because of him and keeping up with what's going on. I think he was the impotence for doing a lot of that growth and awareness in political matters, because I was really mostly just withdrawn to myself kinda concerned and didn't care about civics in high school. I hated it the, I didn't hate the teacher, but I hated the class. I hated the material. I got so tired of studying Krucjef. And back then Krucjef was saying, "We will bury you." There was this scare of the atomic bomb being dropped on us at any given moment. And even one night when I was a freshman in college, in the middle of the night, air raid sirens went off and that was close to the time when we had the missile, what did they call it, with Cuba, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and I just knew in any second I would be blown to bits, and so, there I was, just waiting to be blown up in the middle of the night. Everybody else I knew was still asleep, but I heard the sirens. Well, it didn't blow us up, but that was a scary time to live, when people were buying and making bomb shelters and that was the thing that people were doing then and so it was a scary time to live. It was a scary time to live for that, and also the Vietnam War at the same time, trying to not have to go die over there in Vietnam. It was a scary time, being a college student in the early 60s, middle 60s, too.

Ashley Shelton: Ok, last question – what is your very favorite thing about living in Arkansas?

Paul Pitt: Oh, the fact that it's rural. The fact that there is jungle and woods here. I know when I went to do my final degree I made a presentation in an art history class and I mentioned something about I'm from Arkansas and every time I see a piece of woods here I get excited. Because Memphis is very much a, even though I grew up on the edge of Memphis, the north edge of Memphis, close to the woods, Memphis has become so

much, it's so much asphalt and concrete and problems with so many people there that I just don't like to see, just don't like to see. I don't like traffic, and I've said many times the older I get the more backwoods I get. So, to a degree, I guess that's true. I really still like to go visit Mountain View because it's even less rural than Searcy and I like getting out where there are, where there is nature, where I can see unspoiled nature. And I think that's about the most beautiful thing you can see, as far as landscape goes, I don't care who has made a beautiful building or who has made a beautiful garden or who has made whatever, if I can see unspoiled nature, that's God's creation, that's really beautiful to me, as far as landscape goes. That's where I like to be.